DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 315 PS 015 036

AUTHOR Copeland, Anne P.; Grossman, Frances K.
TITLE Gender Effects in Parenting.
PUB DATE Oct 84
NOTE 8p.; For related document, see PS 015 037. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (San Francisco, CA, October 16-20, 1984).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Birth Order; *Child Rearing; Divorce; *Family Role; Fathers; Interaction; Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Role; Rating Scales; *Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

The literature on how parent gender influences responses to children has grown enormously in the past decade; mothers and fathers have been found to differ on many dimensions and to be similar on just as many. Conflicting evidence also exists on how a child's gender affects parenting style. This paper reports some important gender differences in the way women and men respond to their children and discusses mediation of these effects by parent personality and other variables. The Family Changes Project, a study of post-separation families, allowed analysis of several aspects of these questions. Children in mother-custody families reported that their fathers often gave them no reason for the divorce, while mothers more often gave an explanation. Videotaped observations of mothers and children playing, made during the first post-separation year, revealed differences in children's responses by sex and age. Also, Type A mothers (impatient, achievement-striving, and aggressive) were found to be more directive with their sons, while Type B mothers were more directive with daughters. Results from the Pregnancy and Parenthood Project revealed parent gender differences in child caretaking, some influenced by the child's birth order and gender. It was concluded that the development of today's children will be influenced by the paradox of receiving direct messages that boys and girls are equal while being surrounded by evidence that their parents behave very differently in their family roles. (CB)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Anne P. Copeland
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED255315

PS 015036

# Gender Effects in Parenting

Anne P. Copeland and Frances K. Grossman

We start with the premise -- and data to be presented later support this -- that children report gender to be a generally important family characteristic, a filter through which they could be expected to process incoming information. What evidence is there that the specific acts of parenting are affected by gender? It is important to understand both (a) how the gender of a parent affects his/her behavior, attitudes, and judgments with regard to child-rearing, and (b) how the gender of a child affects the parents' behaviors, values, and attitudes in relation to that child.

The literature on the first of these questions, how parent gender influences behavior and responses to children, has grown enormously in the past five to ten years, in parallel with the increase in interest in family interaction research. Mothers and fathers have been found to differ on many dimensions, and to be quite similar on just as many. The differences are not be surprising. Mothers, for example, spend more time taking care of their children than fathers. Fathers, in turn, seem to play in ways that are quite different from mothers, using a more physically active, arousing, and idiosyncratic manner (e.g. Lamb, 1977).

Mother-child and father-child linguistic exchanges are also different in important respects . Mothers tend to talk more to their infants and young children and are more accepting and empathic in their verbalizations. Fathers have been found to provide more complex information to young children and to interrupt them more than their mothers do, and to tease more, especially their sons. As noted in a 1985 review by Pollack and Grossman, these differences, and many other parent gender differences, are greatly reduced when families are studied in laboratory settings, in contrast to the home context. That is, when told to interact for the researchers, fathers can behave precisely as

mothers do. When left more to their own devices, they rarely do.

On the other hand, research has revealed more similarities than differences in how mothers and fathers interact with their young children. For example, Greif and Gleason, (1980), found similarities in how mothers and fathers prompt their children to be polite. Lewis and Feiring (1982) found no differences in the amount of nurturing and caregiving of parents of three year olds at the dinner table, and Lytton (1980) reported no differences in fathers' and mothers' responses to attachment bids from their two-year-olds. In our search for the roots of gender effects in parenting, then, we learn some from knowing the gender of a parent. But we need to look further, and to include other parts of the equation.

Do daughters elicit different parenting styles than sons? Many studies suggest not. On the other hand, some researchers have found that parents praise and criticize their sons more than their daughters, and that style of play has been found to be, to some degree, dependent on a child's gender. Besides simple boy-girl differences, gender matching between parents plays a role. This literature is also complex, however, and generalizations hazardous. Some evidence supports the "same-sex severity, cross-sex indulgence" rule, as when fathers are found to use more imperatives with their sons than their daughters. On the other hand, support can also be presented for the opposite rule, as was found by Weinraub and Frankel, who reported more interaction and shared play in same gender dyads than in opposite gender dyads. It is important to note that in a number of these studies, particularly with young children, it was the fathers who were making the child-gender distinction, not the mothers. This is yet another generalization supported by these studies and others.

These two factors, then -- a child's gender and a parent's gender -- seem to affect family interaction a great deal. In this paper, we describe

some important gender differences in the way women and men respond to their children. In contrast, we found very few main effects of the child's gender on parent behavior, but some effects mediated by aspects of parent personality and other variables.

The Family Changes Project, the study of post-separation families, allowed analysis of several aspects of the gender and parenting question. While custodial mothers and fathers did not differ from each other in their reports of how much they talked to other people about finances, jobs, future hopes, and daily problems, custodial mothers did report talking more about their children's adjustment than did custodial fathers. When children in mother-custody families were asked about the reasons each parent had given them about the reason for the divorce, children reported that their fathers more often gave them no reason, while mothers more often explained it somehow, usually in specific terms like arguing, one not loving the other, or that one parent -- usually the father -- had behaved inappropriately. Mothers' parenting attitudes, as measured on Block's Child Rearing Practices Report, were not different depending on the gender of their children. Not enough fathers participated in this project to provide comparable data, but exploring this question with fathers would be an important addition.

Very few main effects for the gender of the child were found in the analysis of the videotaped observations of mothers playing with their target children in this study. (Remember that fathers and children were never videotaped). Only when other factors are considered do gender differences emerge. For example, when the length of the marital separation and children's ages were included in the analyses, the results showed that while girls' interactions with their mothers did not vary systematically across the first post-separation year, that of boys did. The 6-8-year old boys started the year with more difficult interactions but things were smoother by the end of

the year; the trend was the opposite for older, 9-12-year-old, boys, who seemed to begin the year "holding it together," if you will, but by the end, were engaged in nonresponsiveness and a lack of positive interaction with their mothers. So inclusion of age and length of separation in the analyses revealed otherwise hidden child-gender effects.

Similarly, in the same study, an intriguing interaction between parent personality and child gender was found. Type A mothers (i.e., impatient, achievement-striving, and aggressive women) were particularly directive in these videotaped interactions -- as expected -- but only with sons. Daughters of these mothers were more compliant than sons, suggesting a smoother interaction, though perhaps at some cost to the daughters. With Type B mothers, on the other hand, the child's gender had the opposite effect -- this time girls got the more directive and less supportive behavior from the mothers.

Clearly this is not an exhaustive list of the factors that mediate the gender effects in parenting. But they make our point that both parent and child gender <u>are</u> important, though often only in interaction with personality and context dimensions.

The Pregnancy and Parenthood Project afforded the opportunity to examine gender effects in two-parent families, and thus comparisons of mothers and fathers with the same children, in this case 5-year-olds. Here, a number of parent gender differences emerged. On the Parent Attitude Questionnaire, a paper and pencil scale of attitudes towards parenting, mothers had higher scores on measures of adaptive control, reciprocity, and closeness than did fathers. Similarly, on another paper and pencil scale, mothers reported spending more time performing caretaking functions than fathers reported, while there were no differences in the time parents reported playing with the child or in the amount of time spent with the child on weekends. Fathers

spent time caretaking primarily with their first-born sons; they spent much less time taking care of first-born daughters or later-born girls or boys. Importantly, mothers and fathers were not different in their observed support for the children's affiliation or autonomy, nor did they respond differently to boys and girls on these interactional measures.

In general, then, the picture is a complex one. Some parenting differences and some similarities appeared in the data; differences in parenting relationships with boys vs. girls were not as pronounced and are not best characterized by a simple gender effect. Not surprisingly, mothers appear more involved with their children than fathers, in time spent with them and time spent talking about them. They also appear, by their own and their children's accounts, to have more communication with their children than do fathers. As a consequence, children seem more central to mothers' than fathers' lives; whether this is a cause or effect of the type of relationships they have with their children is, of course, unclear from these data. Leaving aside for now -- and perhaps for a long while -- the question of <u>why</u> it is that mothers have come to be the closer, more central communicator and nurturer of their children, one can still speculate on the outcome of this set of affairs for the children -- for the daughters and for the sons -- in these families. Social learning theory would predict, due to gender-differentiated modeling, the continuation of sex-typed behavior for men and women who are growing up in traditional two-parent families. We of course have the hope that some of the limiting gender stereotypes will break down, but in fact, now, in the mid-80's, we might begin to recognize the relative intransigence of these roles. Although mothers and fathers now appear more similar than different in their parenting, there are still clear differences. Today's children, then, are confronted with the direct message that boys and girls are equal while being surrounded with continual evidence that their

fathers and mothers in fact behave very differently in their roles in the family. Their development must be influenced by this paradox, in ways that are not yet understood. Apparently, children for several more decades will be learning about, observing, and being an actor in a gender-typed family. Thus the education and modification of attitudes with which each of us has had to struggle, may have to continue as the way to the break down of stereotypes for a while longer.

Table 1

| Measure | Effect |
|---|---|
| **Family Changes Project** | |
| Use of Friends for Discussion | mothers talk more than fathers about children, no differences for finances, jobs, hopes, other |
| Reasons for Divorce (from Child) | mothers gave reasons more often than fathers |
| Block Child Rearing Practices | no differences |
| Observation of Play | no main child gender effects; only significant in interaction with other variables |
| **Pregnancy and Parenthood Project** | |
| Parent Attitude Questionnaire (adaptive control, reciprocity, closeness) | mothers higher |
| Time Spent with Child | mothers higher on caretaking and weekday; no differences on play and weekend |
| Support for Child's Autonomy and Affiliation | no differences |

# END

# DEPT. OF EDUCATION

# NAT'L INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

# ERIC

## DATE FILMED

# J U L Y

# 29_ 1985